

INSIDE TRACKS

Wildlife project aims to boost Hungry Horse elk herd

If things work out as planned, more elk should be available soon for viewing and for hunting opportunity in the mountains around Hungry Horse Reservoir. Biologists for the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks are using innovative methods to offset losses of elk and mule deer habitat caused by the construction of Hungry Horse Dam.

The waters of Hungry Horse Reservoir flooded nearly 9,000 acres of prime elk winter range. According to Department studies, this habitat loss could have decreased the elk herd in the area by 175 animals.

The Department, using dollars from a trust fund established by the Bonneville Power Administration through the Northwest Power Planning Council, has begun a project to boost the carrying capacity of the elk winter habitat to pre-dam levels. Once the winter habitat is restored, the elk herd should rebound.

According to Project Biologist Dan Casey, several methods will be used to improve winter habitat and forage.

"We plan to create 54 openings on southwest slopes in the Firefighter

Mountain area, where the best opportunities for enhancement exist," said Casey. "These openings will average about 12 acres, and will be made through a timber sale offered by the U.S. Forest Service."

The small openings will be cut in dense lodgepole pine stands and offer several advantages for elk. "The edges created by the openings could be as important as the openings themselves," noted Casey. "The edge represents

habitat where cover and food are close together. Also, the openings will allow sunlight into the forest canopy which will encourage vegetative growth and diversity, and increase forage."

Another important aspect of the project will be to monitor the elk population before and after these vegetation treatments. The response of the elk herd to the various treatments will indicate which were successful and point to needed adjustments as the project goes forward.

To determine elk numbers, biologists must capture and mark some of the elk in the herd. Casey has calculated that at least 25% of the herd must be marked to give accurate estimates from aerial counts.

At the end of the 1991 hunting season, 39 marked elk remained in the Firefighter herd of about 200. Annual capture and marking is required to maintain the percentage of marked animals because of mortality by hunting and other causes.

Capturing elk is a physical and time consuming process in more ways than one. Casey and research assistant (continued on back page)



TRAP SITE. Rick Malta and Dan Casey stand near a trap site along Hungry Horse Reservoir.



COLLARED. An elk is released from a trap after it has been collared. Such identification will help biologists monitor the elk population before and after various projects to restore habitat around the reservoir.


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HUNTER EDUCATION RATHER THAN REGULATION

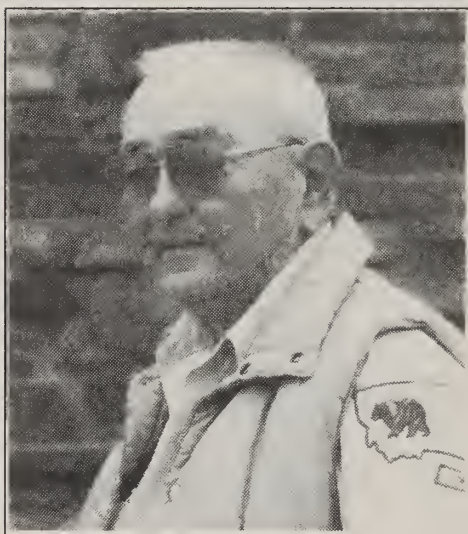
MONTANA DEPT. OF FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

Montana's hunter education program is a bright light for the future of our hunting heritage. According to Tim Pool, program leader in Helena, Montana's bowhunter and hunter education programs have been ranked in the top 10 of all programs in the states and provinces in North America. The success of the program is largely related to the dedication and quality of the 1,000 volunteer instructors that serve across the state.

Each year, these volunteer instructors train about 6,000 youth to be responsible hunters. Responsible hunters are safe, law-abiding and ethical—these are the qualities that will ensure the future of hunting in Montana. 

Witts nears 35 years as instructor

Bill Witts has been teaching Hunter Education to Montana youth since 1958. He still believes in it. "I believe it's a great program," said Witts. "I'm not aware of one kid that had a hunting accident after he went through my course."




Witts got involved with the program because he loves kids. He got interested in wildlife and hunting as a boy growing up on the family farm in Minnesota. "My dad loved to hunt and

fish," he said. "So do I, and so do my kids and grandkids. It's an unbroken tradition."

The program has changed greatly in the nearly 35 years Witts has participated. He mentions an expanded class schedule with double the hours of instruction, films, and more emphasis on ethics.

Witts is concerned that the increasing number of single-parent households will lead to less opportunity for kids to experience hunting. "If the kids don't have a parent who is interested in hunting and knowledgeable about gun handling, I worry about them."

"One of the high points in my teaching has been to watch almost everyone pass the test and get their certificate. Many years ago, one kid only finished one page of the test long after the others were finished. I took him in another room and read him the questions; he only missed one. That had to be the high point."


Recently, Witts reflected on how much longer he'll teach. "I'll probably teach one more year," he said. "Oh, I may go on. Heck, I'll probably go on until I can't make the stairs." 

First-time bowhunters must now complete education course

Beginning in 1992, all first-time bowhunters, regardless of age, are required to complete the National Bowhunter Education Course before they can purchase an archery license in Montana.

The requirement exempts any bowhunter 18 years or older who

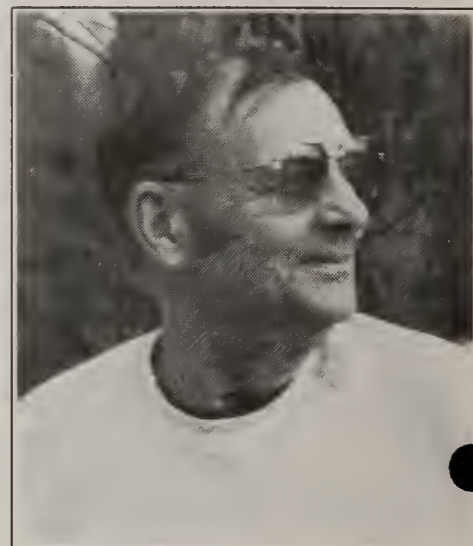
can present a prior year's archery license from any state or province.

For a \$5 charge hunters who have misplaced an archery license from a previous year can verify the purchase by signing a duplicate license affidavit and then purchasing a 1992 license for \$8. 

Lincoln county chief instructor marks 25th year

For Ray Carlson, the chief hunter education instructor for Lincoln County, 1992 marks his 25th year on the job. Carlson got involved in the program in 1968.


"I've hunted all my life," said Carlson. "And I love kids. Putting the two together has always been a part of my life."



Carlson's approach to teaching youth has been a combination of discipline and practical experience. "We don't have to teach," he said. "We're volunteers. I tell the kids that the door isn't locked. If they don't act like adults we send them home." But Carlson can only recall three youth that were expelled from the course.

"We give the kids the fine points, but they have to put that knowledge to use for themselves," Carlson said. "Most of the young people we've had in the course go on to be excellent, law-abiding hunters; I feel good about that."

Carlson and his wife, Steffi, have been married, and inseparable, since 1947. They met while in the service in Germany; he worked as a sergeant in the mess hall, and she worked in a hospital. She grew up in Poland and still carries a faint accent.

Asked to sum up his 25 years in the hunter education program, Carlson emphasized firearm safety. "If we saved one life it was worth all the effort," he said. 

Mehn known for innovative law enforcement

Warden Mike Mehn of Libby is known for his innovative approach to wildlife law enforcement. He believes that the best deterrent against breaking wildlife laws is to build a relationship between the warden and the community based on mutual respect. This approach has worked well; violations in the Libby area have decreased.

Mehn came to Montana from Utah just after graduating from high school in 1974. His family had spent vacations in Montana, and he fell in love with the country. "My dad died in 1972, and some money went into a trust for education," he said. "That made it possible for me to go to Montana State."

After attending college for 1-1/2 years, he took a job on a ranch near Tom Miner Basin. He met his wife, Teri, while working on the ranch, and they were married in 1977.

Mehn worked various timber industry jobs for the next several years, then returned to Montana State with Teri to finish his wildlife degree. "We were as poor as church mice," said Mehn. "But I managed to graduate in 1982. I volunteered for everything the Department had: hunter safety instructor, check stations, game surveys."

In 1983, Mehn began his warden career in Glasgow. "I loved the prairie and people of eastern Montana," said Mehn. "The Missouri breaks are unequaled in beauty. Serving in eastern Montana rounds a warden out."

One of the first boats Mehn checked on Fort Peck reservoir contained a surprise.

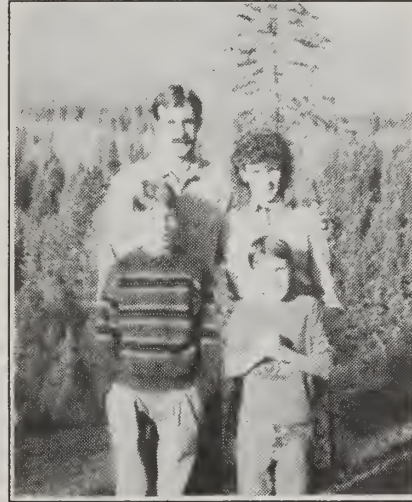
"We pulled up to a rental boat and there was a woman just sitting on the seat completely naked. It was embarrassing, but once you're

there you are committed. I asked her to hold up her life preserver, and she did. After we pulled away I admitted to my partner that I hadn't even noticed if the boat had a current registration sticker."

Mehn moved to Libby in 1987. "That first fall, two guys from Wisconsin shot two cow moose and just walked away

from it. A guy in their camp called me later, and I notified Wisconsin wardens, who were able to apprehend them. Probably 80% of violators are caught by sportsmen calling in tips. I really depend on it. The people in Libby have been very helpful.

"Probably the most common violation I run across is party hunting, or tag transfer. People don't realize how that damages the resource and robs law-abiding hunters. If one guy kills two cow elk and puts someone's tag on one of them, it's one fewer elk your son or the kid down the street will have an opportunity to hunt."



WARDEN AND FAMILY. Mike Mehn, wife Teri, and sons Zak and Chauncy.

Mehn gets little time to fish or hunt, but this year he had a memorable experience with his son, Zakary, who is 12. "Zak and I went up a creek drainage about 3:00 p.m. to rattle for white-tailed deer," said Mehn.

"I sat above him and rattled, and watched him raise his scope. After a short time, he fired, and we heard the deer fall. You hear about the thrill of watching someone get a first buck, but you can't imagine how exciting it is, especially when you're with your own kid."

Working with Judge Marlene Herreid, Mehn believes progress is being made in reducing repeat violations. "I showed our hunter safety and ethics film, 'Measure of the Hunt,' to Judge Herreid, and she now requires all violators to watch it. I've also been considering asking that serious violators re-take the entire hunter education course."

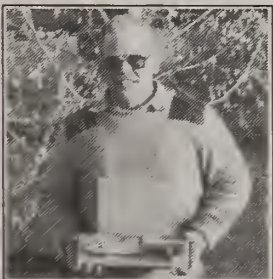
Deterrent is a concept that Mehn continues to explore. "You can't measure deterrent," he said. "But when someone sees you 50 miles from Libby on some back road, he or she remembers it."

"It comes down to treating people with respect. If you are respectful to people, it goes a long way; more people will admit their mistake and plead guilty. The violator is usually embarrassed enough, and learns from the experience."



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS. Warden Mike Mehn visits with a local angler along the Kootenai River.

Frank Bowen named top NCO in Desert Storm



Parks division employee Frank Bowen has been named the top junior non-commissioned officer for the 100,000 member reserve forces who served in the Desert Storm Campaign. Bowen served in the special operations campaign and conducted long-range surveillance in northern Iraq.

At times, Bowen could make out the lights of Baghdad across the desert horizon. He spent much of his time looking for air strike targets such as rocket launchers and bunkers. His company would call in the air strikes, then go in on the ground to determine their success.

The troops were dropped behind enemy

lines from low-flying helicopters. The company sometimes felt isolated in the desert, but they could count on two Apache helicopters for support. "We needed them a few times, and they got there within five minutes," he said.

Bowen was involved in the campaign for five months and went through difficult times. "I missed my family; that's what stuck in my mind," he said. "There were a half-million of us over there, but it was still lonely without the family."

Bowen lives near Marion with his wife, Missy, and his children Stephanie, 16, and Dusty, 11.

Hungry Horse elk herd...

(continued from front page)

Rick Malta each must snowmobile more than 2,000 bone-jarring miles each winter to operate traps at sites around Hungry Horse Reservoir. The daily snowmobile route on the rutted access roads sent Malta to the chiropractor more than once. "People have no idea how much snowmobiling we do," noted Casey.

And wrestling an animal that weighs 500 pounds or more without tranquilizing it can sometimes turn into a rodeo.

"Several times we caught two elk in the same small Clover trap," said Casey. "So far we've always been able to handle the animals, but a few times elk we thought were secure stood up and took us for a ride. Each time it's a little different. One elk we released from a trap ran absolutely smack dab into a tree, fell flat on his face, then got up and ran off as if nothing had happened."

Casey and Malta use two kinds of traps on the project: the small Clover

traps, which are little more than netting stretched over an 8-ft. by 4-ft. metal frame, and a large corral trap. Both traps are baited with hay and


"...when you work closely with the animal, you realize it's just trying to survive against some pretty tough odds"

grain, and are fitted with a trip wire to close the door after the animals have entered. Once in the Clover trap, elk are herded into a chute where the animals are fitted with ear tags, radio collars or neck bands.

Elk caught in corral traps are fitted by reaching through openings in the netting. Using these methods, the biologists can avoid using tranquilizing drugs on the elk. Most elk can be worked and released within 15 minutes, further reducing stress on the animals.

The marked elk will allow Casey to develop an "observability index" during aerial survey flights. Eventually this index will be the basis for an accurate population survey after the marking of animals is gradually phased out.

One of the benefits of the project has been the opportunity to describe the habits of an elk herd living in a densely forested range. "Elk in the Hungry Horse area don't behave like animals in the classic south central Montana elk herds which feed in open parks for much of the day," said Casey. "When snow is the deepest, these elk stay in timbered habitat, acting almost like white-tailed deer."

Casey has developed a deeper understanding of the elk while working on the project. "I understand the vulnerability of the animal more," he said. "When you see a big bull elk you think of it as a magnificent monarch, almost indestructible. But when you work closely with the animal, you realize it's just trying to survive against some pretty tough odds." 

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of the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks:

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